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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001921

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DCHA/OFDA FOR ROBERT THAYER  
AID/W FOR AA MARK WARD AND ANE ANNE DIX  
DEPT PASS TO SCA/EX  
DEPT PASS TO SCA/PB  
DCHA/FPP FOR MATTHEW NIMS AND PAUL NOVICK  
ROME FOR FODAG  
BANGKOK FOR RDM/A TOM DOLAN, ROB BARTON  
KATHMANDU FOR USAID OFDA BILL BERGER AND SUE MCINTYRE

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SUBJECT: GOB and Political Party Representatives in Barisal talk  
about Cyclone Sidr

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Local government and political party officials in Barisal gave positive reviews of the Government of Bangladesh's initial response to Cyclone Sidr, as well as the role played by the U.S. Government, including the U.S. military. The Barisal branches of the main political parties responded in a variety of ways to the post-cyclone needs of the district's residents; the Jatiya and Jamaat-e-Islami parties' relief activities appear to be the most comprehensive. All the officials identified the broad issues of restarting the local economies and continuing to improve cyclone shelters and other preparations against future cyclones as critical medium- to long-term responses to Cyclone Sidr. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) EmbOffs staffing the Embassy's Liaison Office embedded in the Civil-Military Operations Center in Barisal district, the forward operating base for US-Bangladesh Cyclone Sidr relief efforts, met district officials from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Awami League (AL), Jatiya Party, and Jamaat-e-Islami, as well local government authorities December 3-6. The officials discussed their role in cyclone relief efforts and the impact cyclone recovery might have on the caretaker government and its roadmap for elections by the end of 2008.

#### Impact of the Storm in the Community

¶3. (SBU) All of the party and GOB representatives characterized as severe the short-term economic impact of cyclone Sidr. They said the most serious economic concerns are the lack of seeds and seedlings for the next rice crop due to the substantial damage to this season's harvest and the exacerbation of the already inflated prices of everyday commodities. Former MPs from the Awami League, Mohammed Afazalul Karim and Lasker Nurul Hoque, also noted that the percentage of women killed in the storm was high and said the women tried to save more of their material possessions and/or protect their children instead of just saving themselves. A variety of officials voiced concern about getting people back to regular lives

quickly and avoiding the emergence of a 'relief mindset,' where standing in line for aid becomes preferable to returning to paying work was a serious concern. (NOTE: Evidence of this 'relief mindset' was observed first-hand by EmbOff during a trip through neighboring Khulna division, also affected by Cyclone Sidr. Observations from this visit will be reported septel. END NOTE.)

#### Party Responses to the Disaster

14. (SBU) The BNP's Nazimuddin Ahmed Panna said that while his party was engaging in some relief activities, they were on a much smaller scale than relief activities for past disasters. Similarly, the Awami League members also did not indicate that the AL was mounting a strong disaster response. In their meeting with EmbOff they seemed more concerned with casting aspersions on their political opponents' relief efforts.

15. (SBU) In contrast, both the Jatiya and Jamaat-e-Islami representatives laid out detailed recovery operations. While the AL and BNP representatives mentioned visits from central level leaders, the Jatiya Party was specific in describing their high level visitors, including the party chairman, visiting affected areas November 23-25; he distributed 4,000 relief packets and 2,000 taka per family, which suffered a family member killed in the cyclone. The Barisal city Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, Muazzam Husain Helal, and other Jamaat party members reported that 21,000 Jamaat party workers in 16 different locations are currently engaged in relief operations. They said Jamaat relief operations are based solely on need, and assistance is being distributed irrespective of party or religious affiliation. (NOTE: Our FSN translator confirmed separately that on a previous visit to cyclone Sidr affected areas, he personally talked with Hindus who were carrying JI relief materials. END NOTE.) JI has published an eight point plan for storm recovery: 1) food, 2) shelter, 3) economic rehabilitation, including re-planting fields and re-stocking cattle and goat herds, 4) a deferment period and/or forgiveness of existing loans, 5) new 0 percent loans, 6) repair of existing and construction of new cyclone

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shelters, 7) repair of existing and construction of new river embankments, and 8) the rebuilding of educational institutions, including schools, madrasahs and universities. Funding for some of Jamaat's operations comes from a request from the central leadership in Dhaka to have all members nationwide contribute the equivalent of one day's wages to a central relief fund.

#### Impressions of US military assistance

16. (SBU) All the political party representatives characterized the GOB early warning and disaster response as good and the U.S. assistance, including the U.S. military presence, as positive. Even when pressed, most saw no negatives to the U.S. military presence, as it is clearly for humanitarian reasons. The BNP representative did mention that some Muslim fundamentalists were reporting that the U.S. military had ulterior motives and was not to be trusted. While he personally did not believe these reports, he said that there were always some people who will believe anything they read and that it was not a large concern.

#### The State of Emergency and Storm Response

17. (SBU) Barisal's Division Commissioner, who in theory has responsibility for Barisal district and five other districts located in Barisal division, all of which were affected by the cyclone, commended the Bangladeshi military for its response, saying that coordination was already close with all levels of local government since the military was already in place as a result of the State of Emergency that has been in place since January 11. This facilitated a rapid response, not only to Cyclone Sidr, but also to the floods over the summer. The Commissioner also confirmed that most of the key relief activities remain coordinated at the district level, with relief committees there feeding information to the central government and then implementing guidelines from Dhaka, in particular from the Ministry of Food and Disaster Relief, for cyclone relief activities.

¶8. (SBU) Both the former Awami League MPs and the BNP representative, however, complained that previously they would have approached wealthy families for donations towards storm relief. Now, both these political parties are hesitant to do so without approval from central party and GOB authorities. The former Awami League MPs did say that they had gone out individually to distribute relief goods, and the BNP representative had also solicited donations as a member of the Barisal Bar Association, but they were unclear as to whether such activities could be undertaken by political parties during the current State of Emergency. The BNP representative also noted that donations may be lower due to individuals' fear of drawing attention to themselves and their wealth from the Anti-Corruption Commission. Similarly, the Jamaat and Jatiya party members noted that they too felt restrained from approaching non-party individuals for donations and that they are undertaking current relief efforts without party banners. The Jamaat representatives also said that they are not closely coordinating with municipalities, as their perception is that sometimes coordination meetings can get in the way of delivery efforts and Jamaat's primary concern was to get their relief delivered.

#### Elections Preparations Continue

¶9. (SBU) Voter registration continues in the less affected areas of Barisal, even in the wake of Cyclone Sidr. The party members generally agreed that by the time elections are expected in late 2008, Cyclone Sidr will not be a political issue, since by that time the majority of recovery efforts will be completed and a new crop cycle is expected to have been successfully harvested. They also expressed general satisfaction with the roadmap to elections as it stands, but all would like to see the ban on political activity withdrawn or at least relaxed further.

#### COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) The Awami League and BNP demonstrated a continued reliance on their respective central committees for guidance, which appears to be either lacking at this time or the guidance itself is to take no action. The Jatiya and Jamaat parties displayed more organization and initiative, both in what they described as their party's activities and in their personal demeanors.

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